

Breaking free from strict chronology: A thematic approach to teaching jazz history

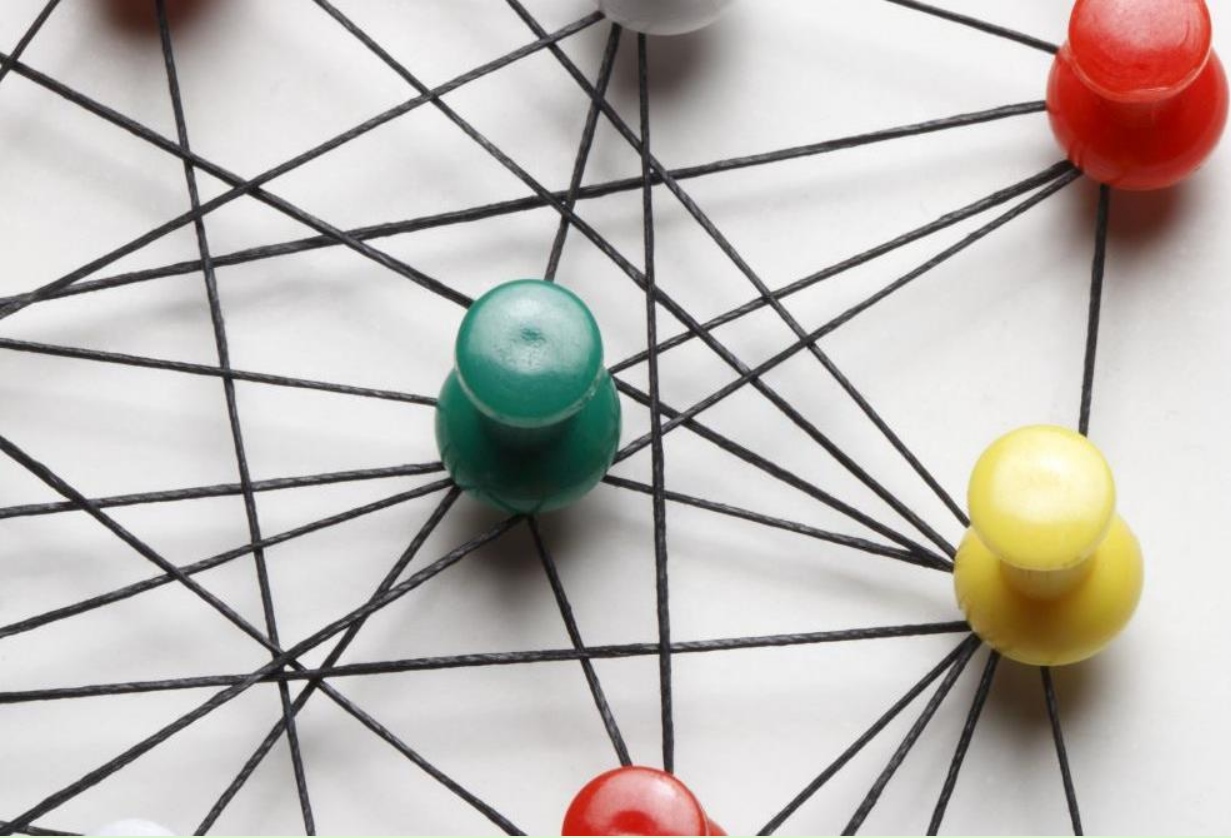
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Preparing students

- Non-music vs. music majors
- Note taking strategies
- Support materials
- Critical listening skills





Selecting themes

- Ensuring common language with starting point
- Themes collectively address all desired content
- Thoroughness and connectivity
- Mapping connections and lesson plans

My 16 themes

Pre-history

Migration

Technology

Regionality in
the USA

Jazz during
wartime

Racism and
colorism

Jazz as
popular
music

Politics,
protest and
peace

Sex, gender
and jazz

Proximity to
the source

The artist
speaks

Coloring
outside the
lines

Religion and
spirituality

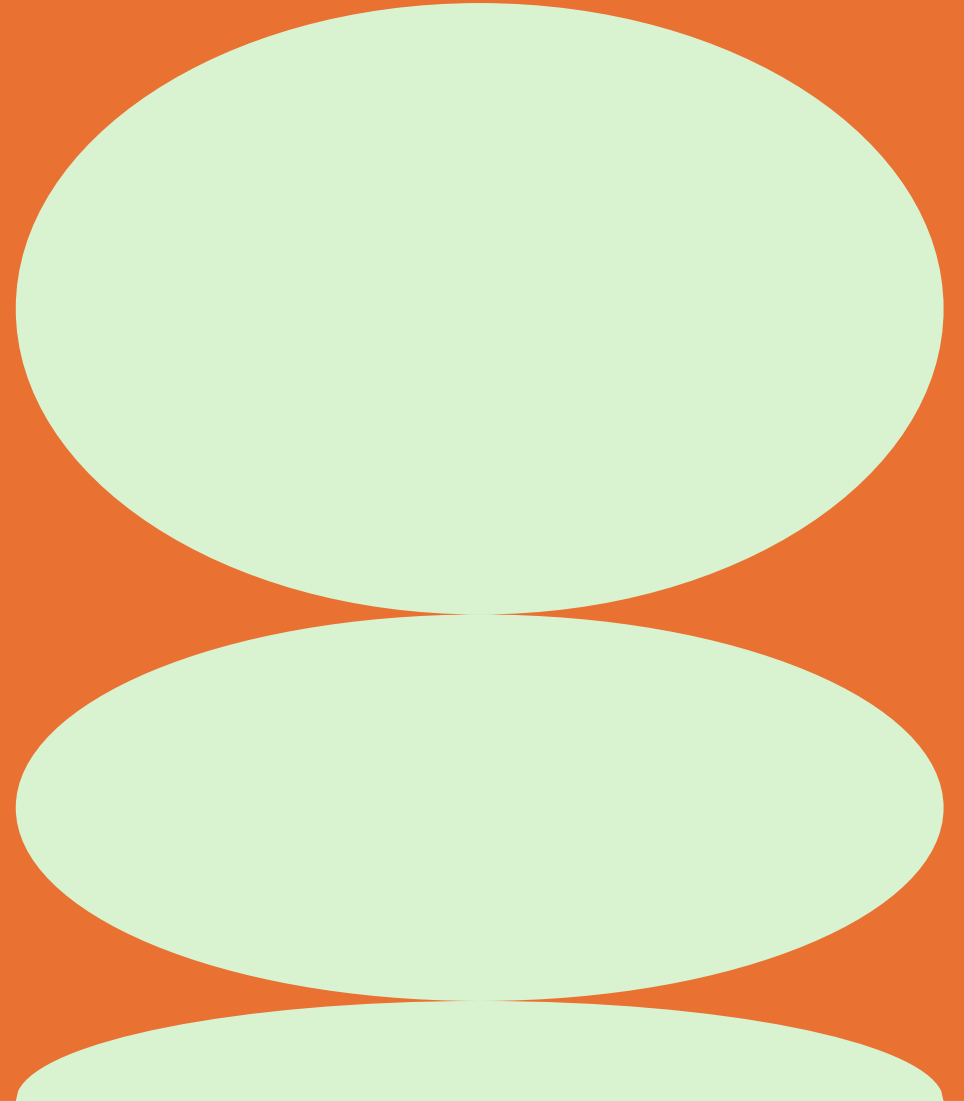
Eclectic
1970s

BAM rebirth
and legacy

The press,
critics and
record labels

Converting from chronological

- **Lay out key genres, figures, musical works/recordings in the curriculum**
- **Look for historical context, emergent themes or overlap for grouping**



Sample theme: Politics, protest and peace

- Pre-1959 and early Civil Rights Movement (semester 1, 1 day)
- Civil Rights Movement 1959 and beyond, and US government (semester 2, 2 days)
- Contemporary: Flint, BLM, military veterans (semester 2, 2 days)



Cons and pros

CONS

- Some students prefer strict chronology
- Less technical and less emphasis on musical characteristics (because it isn't jazz listening)
- Cannot assume everyone will enter with a solid intro to US or world history
- Takes practice to cover everything you want
- Limited experience in a one-semester context

PROS

- More fun and engaging for all, refreshing for instructor
- Flexible for circling back if you run out of class time
- More robust and relevant discussions, greater in-class participation
- Student connections
- Introduce works not commonly addressed
- Decentralizes the power/overemphasis of a few musicians and a few tunes, opens doors for other stories and contributions
- Less technical
- Musicians and key pieces addressed from multiple angles (Ellington example)



Duke Ellington across 8 themes

1. Jazz during wartime
2. Sex, gender and jazz
3. Jazz as popular music
4. Religions, spirituality and jazz
5. Jazz as political music
6. Racism and colorism
7. Migration
8. The artist speaks

Student assessments

Learning logs: synthesize readings and in-class discussions and encourage students to engage in meta-cognition.

Reflect and write on observations, particular questions or speculations, self-awareness, the integration of theory and ideas, or to critique.

Canvas discussion prompts: enhance and incentivize on-time attendance, participation, review previous content, check reading comprehension, solicit test questions, and/or ease into the day's lesson plan

Exams: balancing essay writing on the themes and required listening.

Research project: numerous checkpoints (proposal, annotated bibliography, library worksheets, draft, consultation, final)

Resources:

Bares, W. (2020). A jazz history course for the information era. *Jazz Education in Research and Practice* 1(1), 59-78. DOI 10.2979/jazzeducrese.1.1.06

Williams, S. (2016). *Teaching history: Effective teaching for learning history — chronological vs. Thematic approaches to student historical comprehension* (105). [Master's thesis, Dordt University]. Dordt Digital Collections.
https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/med_theses/105



Thank *you*
for getting up early!



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